ERIC P. NEWMAN NUMISMATIC EDUCATION SOCIETY

6450 Cecil Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

July 31, 1990

Mr. Robert Costello
Editor in Chief
Random House Dictionary
201 E. 50th Street
New York, NY 10022

Dear Mr. Costello:

The word **phony** and the words derived from it are so commonly used and so imbedded in our language that I believe it is important to have their etymology clarified. Although my research on the subject was published long ago (copy enclosed), I was stimulated to write you by an advertisement which recently appeared in a St. Louis newspaper using **pf** for **f** as a comic attention getter. The comic use of substitute for **f**, as you may know, is more than a century old in the United States, and I enclose one such early example of the use of **ph** for **f** from a St. Louis newspaper.

The previously used derivation basis for **phony** from the word **fawney** is phony in my opinion and really has no support. **Phony** has never been known to be used in England or Ireland until it was long established by popular use in the United States. Fawney has never been spelled **phawney** and never pronounced **phony**. **As phony as a three dollar bill** is exclusively an American expression. In my article I have tried to show that the meaning of "funny" in "funny business" denotes deception, falsity, dishonesty or hanky-panky. It is used more for a sneaky act than for a major crime and has a derisive sense. To put humor into its use, the spelling for the reader and pronounciation for the listener were both slightly modified. As you know, both such changes have been made in the spelling and sound of other words such as **sundae** (formerly Sunday). The expression **funny business** has application to many situations and when **phony** developed it too expanded broadly. Why the expression **funny business** was taken out of Webster's 1907 dictionary in the next editions, I do not understand, as it was and still is extensively used. Does your file have any other plausible alternatives as to the origin of the word **phony**?

I hope you will find my position worthy of sincere consideration.

Sincerely,

Eric P. Newman

Eric P. Newman

EPN:bv

The Missouri Republican
St. Louis, Mo., Oct. 25, 1859
Page 3, Col 5.

LOCAL NEWS

PHANCY PHEMALE PHIGHT -- There was another sound or two of revelry Friday night at the Colloseum, late Mozart Hall. Georgiana Meadows, who is also called Frisky, was there for the first time in all her precious life. During the evening she granted Belle Taylor's fancy man the honor of her hand in the dance, on hearing which Belle Taylor waxed exceeding wroth. Taking Jenny Graham and Hattie Spencer with her, and arming herself with a "sticker", she proceeded to Madame Hunter's easy hotel, where "Frisky" does her eating and sleeping with full interest. But "Frisky" was awake, and grabbing Miss Taylor's knife "let into" all three, coming out victor. The matter was finally amicably adjusted over a social glass. The disturbance didn't wake up any of the policemen.

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RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
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TELEPHONE 212 572-6182

SOL STEINMETZ
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARIES

August 14, 1990

Mr. Eric P. Newman
Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society
6450 Cecil Avenue
St. Louis, Missouri 63105

Dear Mr. Newman:

Thank you very much for you informative letter of July 31, addressed to Mr. Costello, who is at present on vacation.

Your article on the etymology of phony is extremely interesting. The derivation of the expression "as phony as a three dollar bill" is convincingly described. I am not sure, though, whether phoneticians would readily accept the development of phony from funny (as in funny business), though the semantic connection is very persuasive, and the use of ph for f is well attested in literature (for example the recent use of phreak for freak). On the other hand the standard derivation from fawney or fauny is, as you say, without evidence.

I certainly believe that your suggestion deserves consideration and with this in mind I have sent a copy of your letter and article to our etymologist, Jim Rader.

We greatly appreciate your taking the time to write to us and I shall forward your comments to Mr. Costello.

Sincerely yours,

Sol Steinmetz

Sol Steinmetz

SS/lg

ERIC P. NEWMAN NUMISMATIC EDUCATION SOCIETY

6450 Cecil Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

Editorial Office
Random House
~~30~~ Park Ave or 299
New York, NY 10017 or 10171

October 23, 2002

I believe I can improve the origin and meaning of the word PHONY or PHONEY in your dictionary and its relationship to the word FUNNY. I have just located the use of the spelling PHUN and PHUNNIEST on p. 14 of January 7, 1865 Harper's Weekly and feel it strengthens the development of PHONY or PHONEY from funny.

This slang phrase is not new to me as I wrote an article in the August 1974, The Numismatist entitled "As Phony as a Three Dollar Bill". I have enclosed a copy and perhaps you or a predecessor have read it. I will not repeat the material included in the enclosed article. I also corresponded with your department in 1990.

A copy of the newly found Harper's insertion is the earliest use I have located where the word FUN and FUNNIEST in the 19th century is comically spelled with a PH. It is in the advertisement section but has no advertiser's name and seems to be a filler for make-up.

In your prior dictionaries there are two distinct meanings of "funny", the first being "comical, amusing, etc." and the second being " strange, queer, odd, etc." Out of the second meaning I believe came the expression "funny business" in which the meaning is expanded to include improper, fraudulent or fake matters, etc. The slight change in spelling and in pronunciation to emphasize the humorous aspects of those matters was a common prior practice and has developed into a rhyming compound such as phoney-baloney (similar to hanky panky, etc.). This is already in your dictionary.

I also have located the humorous spelling change of a fancy female fight to PHANCY PHEMALE PHIGHT in the Missouri Republican newspaper of October 25, 1859, p. 3, column 5.

I am sincerely convinced that phony or phoney resulted from a slight comic change in the spelling and pronunciation of the word funny to phoney or phony. I believe the Irish or English derivation previously quoted about a brass ring trick is without any American background or use and should be discarded.

I shall be glad to try to furnish any further data or thinking to you. I have tried in the past to help clear up this fascinating and often used word in our language and hope I have been somewhat convincing.

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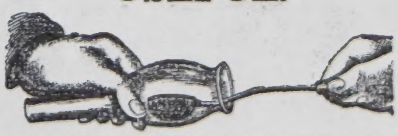

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Jan 7, 1865 Harper's Weekly p. 14

February 4, 1865

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For $2 00 a No. 3 Pen, 1st quality; or a No. 4 Pen, 2d quality; or a No. 5 Pen, 3d quality.
For $2 25 a No. 4 Pen, 1st quality; or a No. 5 Pen, 2d quality; or a No. 6 Pen, 3d quality.
For $2 75 a No. 5 Pen, 1st quality; or a No. 6 Pen, 2d quality.
For $3 50 a No. 6 Pen; $4 50 a No. 7 Pen; $5 75 a No. 8 Pen; $6 50 a No. 9 Pen; $7 50 a No. 10 Pen—all 1st quality.

THE SAME GOLD PENS, IN SILVER EXTENSION CASES, WITH PENCILS.

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For $2 50 a No. 2 Pen, 1st quality; or a No. 3 Pen, 2d quality; or a No. 4 Pen, 3d quality.
For $3 00 a No. 3 Pen, 1st quality; or a No. 4 Pen, 2d quality; or a No. 5 Pen, 3d quality.
For $3 75 a No. 4 Pen, 1st quality; or a No. 5 Pen, 2d quality; or a No. 6 Pen, 3d quality.
For $4 50 a No. 5 Pen, 1st quality; or a No. 6 Pen, 2d quality.
For $5 75 a No. 6 Pen, 1st quality.

GOLD PENS, ALL FIRST QUALITY, IN SILVER-MOUNTED DESK-HOLDERS.

For $2 75 a No. 4 Pen; for $3 25 a No. 5 Pen; for $4 00 a No. 6 Pen; for $5 75 a No. 7 Pen.
For $7 a No. 8 Pen; for $8 a No. 9 Pen; and for $9 a No. 10 Pen.

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Parties ordering must in all instances specify the "Name" or the "Number" and "Quality" of the Pens wanted, and be particular to describe the kind they prefer—whether stiff or limber, coarse or fine.

All remittances sent by mail in registered letters are at my risk, and to all who send twenty cents (charge for registering), in addition to the price of goods ordered, I will guarantee their safe delivery.

Parties sending Gold or Silver will be allowed the full premium on the day received.

TO CLUBS.—A discount of 10 per cent. will be allowed on sums of $12, of 15 per cent. on $24, and of 20 per cent. on $40, if sent to one address at one time.

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Warranted to curl the most straight and stiff hair, on the first application, into short ringlets or waving massive curls. Sent to any address on receipt of $1 00. Address WAUD GILBERT LYON,
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Sent to the army and elsewhere by mail post-paid. Also WATCHES and JEWELRY in great variety, at the lowest prices for cash. Send for circular. Registered letters at our risk. Orders respectfully solicited. Address T. & H. GAUGHAN, Manufacturers, 116 Broadway, New York.

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PHUN FOR THE HOLIDAYS AND HOLIDAY PHUN in great variety and quantity, in the PHUNNIEST SORT OF PHUN, now ready for the Holidays. Sold hull sayle ur retayle, in any quantity, by any body that keeps them for sail.

LADIES, use no more Rouge for your complexions. It can deceive no one, no matter how well applied. If you would have sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks, a complexion of dazzling beauty, follow my directions.

Address, inclosing $1, C. L. BARING,
Box No. 5588 N. Y. P. O.

CHASE'S CHEMICAL COMPOUND

For the Beard. One bottle will force a vigorous growth of hair upon the smoothest face in five weeks, or upon bald heads in eight weeks. Testimonials of thousands given. Circulars mailed free. Warranted as represented, or money returned. Price $1, or four bottles for $3. Sent sealed and post-paid. Address S. S. CHASE,
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SWEAT-PROOF

Soldier's Money-Belt

February 4, 1865

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A BEAUTIFUL PRESENT FOR THE HOLIDAYS.

Just out. The FAMILY GEM SEWING MACHINE, a most wonderful and *elegantly constructed* NOVELTY; is perfectly noiseless in operation; uses the *straight needle*; sews with DOUBLE or SINGLE THREAD; makes the running stitch *more perfect* and regular than by hand; will *gather, hem, ruffle, shir, tuck, run up breadths*, &c., &c. Requires no lubrication or *change of stitch*; is *not liable to get out of order*, and will LAST A LIFETIME, and is the prettiest and most useful *Christmas* or *New Year's Gift* for a lady. *See Opinions of the Press.* "At length the desideratum so long sought for, containing *usefulness, speed*, and *cheapness*, has been gained. The simple structure of this *compact* and beautiful machine will at once command attention, and the *speed, certainty*, and *ease* with which the work is done will make it the FAVORITE with the ladies."—Mrs. ANN S. STEPHENS, in *N. Y. Weekly.* "For the dressmaker it is *invaluable*, for the household it supplies a vacant place."—*Godeys Lady's Book.* "It uses a common needle, sews very rapidly, and is so easily understood that a *child* can use it."—*N. Y. Independent.* This *ingenious* and useful machine is *perfect* in its construction, and has *none* of the *faults* of the *high-priced machines.* No one will pay $50 or $100 for a sewing machine, when *this one* can be bought for $5. This wonderful machine was awarded the FIRST PREMIUM by the New York State Fair, showing its superiority *over all others.* Imitations or *infringements* of this GENUINE Article are liable to prosecution. Agents of perseverance are wanted all over the world, and will be paid $100 *per month.*

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Prospectus and every information can be obtained from either of the Offices of the Company.

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FASHIONABLE WINTER GARMENTS,

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Contains more vegetable extractive matter than twenty boxes of any pills in the world besides; fifty-five hundred physicians use them in their practice to the exclusion of other purgatives. The first letter of their value is yet scarcely appreciated. When they are better known sudden death and continued sickness will be of the past. Let those who know them speak right out in their favor. It is a duty which will save life.

Our race are subject to a redundancy of vitiated bile at this season, and it is as dangerous as it is prevalent; but Brandreth's Pills afford an invaluable and efficient protection. By their occasional use we prevent the collection of those impurities which, when in sufficient quantities

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"THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD."

THE GOLD PEN—THE BEST OF ALL PENS,

MORTON'S GOLD PENS,

THE BEST PENS IN THE WORLD.

On receipt of any of the following sums in Cash, the Subscriber will send by return mail, or otherwise, as directed, a Gold Pen or Pens—*selecting the same according to description*, viz.:

GOLD PENS WITHOUT CASES.

For 50 cents, the Magic Pen; for 75 cents, the Lucky Pen; for $1 00, the Always-Ready Pen; for $1 25, the Elegant Pen; and for $1 50, the Excelsior Pen.—These Pens are not numbered, but correspond in sizes to Numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 respectively.

THE SAME PENS IN SILVER-PLATED EXTENSION CASES WITH PENCILS.

For $1 00, the Magic Pen; for $1 25, the Lucky Pen; for $1 50, the Always-Ready Pen; for $2 00, the Elegant Pen; and for $2 25, the Excelsior Pen.

These are Well-Finished, Good-Writing Gold Pens, with Iridosmin Points, the average wear of every one of which will far outlast a gross of the best Steel Pens; *although they are unwarranted, and, therefore, not exchangeable.*

MORTON'S WARRANTED PENS.

The name, "A. Morton," "Number," and "Quality," are stamped on the following Pens, and the points are warranted for six months, except against accident.

The Numbers indicate size *only;* No. 1 being the smallest, No. 6 the largest, adapted for the pocket; No. 4 the smallest, and No. 10 the largest Mammoth Gold Pen, for the desk.

Long and Medium Nibs of all sizes and qualities. Short Nibs of Nos. 4, 5, 6, and 7, and made only of first quality.

The Long and Short Nibs are fine pointed; the Medium Nibs are Broad, Coarse Business Points. The engravings are fac-similes of the sizes and styles.

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Article

definitions of the words "funny" and "phony" in your dictionary can, ~~there are a couple of words in your dictionary~~ ~~for what~~ I believe improved ~~is debatable~~.

~~I have worked~~ The second meaning of "funny" should include ~~mentally deranged~~ or crazy as in "to act very funny" ~~or just~~ peculiar. the third meaning of funny is used in "funny business" which indicates something ~~illegal~~ ~~dishonest~~ ~~or shady~~ false deceptive, improper ~~or~~ ~~shady~~ ~~this is confirmed by~~ or was taking place.

As to the word phony or phoney I have worked on its ~~the~~ origin ~~of this word~~ for many years and published an article entitled As phoney as a $3 bill which shows ~~the reason~~ its use after the Civil War period because the U.S. Govt authorized a $3 legal tender note and National Bank notes but never issued any. The word phony or phoney is a humorous adaptation of funny by changing the spelling ~~[illegible]~~ and slightly changing the phonetics ~~[illegible]~~ for comedy. ~~[illegible]~~ I ~~[illegible]~~ have just located ~~[illegible]~~ an 1865 Harpers Weekly advertisement (copy enclosed) showing the humorous spelling change. ~~[illegible]~~ I know of no American use whatsoever of the Irish "fainne" or "fannie rig" as that has been in dictionaries with no ~~support~~ factual support for a long time

(over)